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Brooks, Christopher W. *Urban Apologetics: Why the Gospel is Good News for the City*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014. 176 pp. \$12.53.

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Typically, books on apologetics are either broadly topically driven (e.g., works on historical apologetics, scientific apologetics, philosophical apologetics, etc.) or narrowly topically driven (e.g., books refuting Mormonism, responding to Islam, answering the new atheists, etc.). What is unique about Christopher Brooks' new book on apologetics is that it is rooted in place—urban cities—and the specific challenges to the Christian faith found therein. In writing *Urban Apologetics*, Brooks is attempting to fill a void he perceives in the apologetic literature, for “what is . . . desperately lacking are books that equip urban Christians to take the teaching of Christ and apply them to the most important and defining issues facing our communities and society” (14).

Brooks recognizes the challenge to writing such a work, given its dual audience. On the one hand, such a work must honor and adeptly interact with the long tradition of Christian apologetics, a field that is historically ethnically homogeneous. On the other hand, if the author wants an urban audience to be captivated by such a work, he must demonstrate “the ability to connect on a more soulful level and not give in to the temptation to avoid addressing sensitive social issues” (14). Brooks finds precedent and comfort in the life and ministry of C. S. Lewis, who was also confronted with a dual audience—the academic and naturalistic audience of Oxford University and the lay-level Anglican Church audience—yet, successfully inspired,

equipped, and challenged both. Like Lewis, Brooks hopes to be a bridge builder, bringing the wealth of Christian apologetic resources to bear on the issues unique to the urban context.

Brooks thinks that the urban Christian is an “untapped apologetics gold mine” (16). Further, given the multiculturalism found within urban cities, there is a real opportunity for the urban Christian to influence the world. Foremost in Brooks’ mind is the African-American community, a community that is gripped with social ills, marginalization, and “a collective heart cry that questions if God is just and if He can be trusted” (21). Helpfully, Brooks argues that the urban apologist must do more than merely engage ideas. She must engage the heart of the urban minority, a “people whose minds are stirred by the soulful sounds of stanzas, narratives, and hymns, which echo with beauty and truth” (22). The urban apologist must be a preacher-poet in order to capture the heart and mind of listeners, and she must embody the ethic of Jesus to demonstrate Christianity’s truth.

In chapter 1, Brooks considers the question, “Is Christ still relevant in our urban centers?” (27) Given the growing spiritual apathy and the rise of the so-called “nones” who declare no religious identity, a negative answer to the question is reasonable. Yet, notes Brooks, Americans are passionate about many things—the economy, health care, the energy crisis, immigration, sexual identity, homelessness, and hunger—and this confirms that we humans still do care about the big issues in life. So, why is there so much spiritual apathy? Brooks argues, “The problem is not a lack of interest in things that matter. The problem is a perceived disconnect in the minds of many between the things that matter and the message we preach” (29). The task then of the urban apologist is to show the relevance of the gospel to these issues of perennial concern. We are to present a Christianity that cares about human flourishing by meeting the physical needs of those we seek to reach as we connect those needs ultimately to Christ and the gospel.

In chapter 2, Brooks locates apologetics within the context of the Great Commission. “Apart from evangelism, apologetics is aimless and potentially dangerous because it lacks the heart of the gospel, which is to bring people to Christ!” (40) While I think he falls into a number of false dichotomies here—e.g., Jesus calls us to be fishers of men, not great debaters (instead of both); either apologetics is connected with evangelism, or it is a waste of time (there are other benefits to apologetics, including strengthening the faith of believers, etc.)—still, his overall concern is valid...the goal of apologetics is not to win arguments, rather it is to be a faithful witness to Christ. For the urban apologist, this faithful witness will be relational and involve patience, community, and the embodiment of a Christian ethic.

In chapter 3, the question of morality is discussed. Urban Christians are constantly confronted with difficult ethical situations, thus “a healthy amount of focus in apologetics should concentrate on ethics” (52). Throughout, the discussion focuses on right *actions* without much attention given to virtuous *character* (I think this is a notable lacuna) within a fallen world. In order to avoid the pitfalls of relativism and postmodernism with respect to ethical behavior, Brooks advocates a kind of Divine Command Theory, where morally right actions are consonant with the commands of a wholly good God. The resulting Christian morality provides a pathway for addressing the most pressing ethical issues facing the urban Christian, issues that Brooks picks up, one by one, in subsequent chapters.

In chapter 4, Brooks addresses abortion, a distinctly urban issue that has significantly harmed minority women and children, arguing that it is our duty to “remind people of the divine imperative to honor life and the tragic consequences that we experience when we don’t” (65). Helpfully, as Brooks presents the biblical and biological evidence that life begins at conception and thus ought to be protected, he cautions us as we step into discussion with others on this topic

to be aware of the intense emotional issues at stake and to do our best to offer the mercy of the cross to those affected by its plight.

In chapter 5, Brooks provides a thorough discussion of the biblical case for traditional views on human sexuality, examining in depth the six biblical passages that directly address homosexual behavior (Genesis 19:1–11; Leviticus 18:22; 20:13; Judges 19; Romans 1:26–27; and 1 Corinthians 6:9) and arguing that they leave little room for an alternative (pro-homosexual) interpretation. “Scripture is expressly adamant,” he writes, “that once we have identified a behavior that is outside the will of God, we must abstain from that behavior” (79). Importantly, Brooks adeptly notes the connection between the debate over homosexuality and one’s stand on biblical authority. The chapter concludes with an up-to-date discussion of the current science related to homosexuality as well as the devastating social impact of high-risk sexual behavior, particularly within the urban context.

“No issue,” states Brooks in chapter 6, “is more critical to the success and mission of the urban church than that of rebuilding the broken family” (97). The urban family in particular is weak, which leads to weak communities and weak local churches. While there may be many urban Christians, there are far fewer who live out a Christian worldview. Thus, part of the urban apologist’s task is to engage in “discipleship-driven apologetics” (99) in order to help urban Christians act consistently with a Christian worldview, especially when it comes to the family. Brooks suggests a trifold approach of modeling Christ, proclaiming a biblical worldview, and meeting physical needs as the way to “penetrate hearts in the hardest urban communities” (108). In doing so, urban families will be restored and the urban churches strengthened.

In addition to being a melting pot of nationalities, the city also contains a plurality of religious faiths. Three prominent concerns of the urban apologist, addressed in chapter 7, are

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Islam, African/black thought and Nationalist religions (nicely summarized by Michael Smokovitz in the appendix), and skepticism. After summarizing the history and core tenets of Islam, Brooks helpfully discusses the appeal of Islam and other Nationalist religions to African-Americans. Islam is attractive because of its non-Western heritage, militant nature, ability to instill discipline, and its misogynistic ethical system. Brooks is convinced that many African-Americans reject Christianity because of the ethos of Islam and other Nationalist religions, and not in virtue of their doctrines. Part of the task of the urban apologist is to dispel the myths that Christianity is inherently white and racist as well as the idea that Islam or other Nationalist religions are somehow better for humanity than Christianity. Regarding skepticism, Brooks addresses some of the prominent objections to belief in God, including the problem of evil, miracles, moral relativism, and the history of personal and institutional ethical failures, providing helpful (albeit brief) talking points in response to the skeptical challenge.

Brooks discusses in chapter 8 the call for Christians to be involved in social justice, specifically related to economic fairness. He argues for a kind of “Christian capitalism” (141) as “the most effective means for helping ensure financial freedom for all” (141). Additionally, such economic freedom for all “can only be achieved in a free economy where gifted leaders are committed to living among those whom they serve” (143) as they faithfully work for “fairness in opportunities for education, employment, and entrepreneurship” (143). We must embody the truth that we believe, and one of the best ways to do that is to reject a kind of “arm’s length” (143) mentality that keeps Christians disconnected from the day-to-day lives of the poor.

In the concluding chapter 9, Brooks argues, “every apologist needs a church and every church needs an apologist” (146). To this I say a hearty “Amen.” The apologist can help equip the church to address the various defeater beliefs to Christianity and show how right belief

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connects to spiritual formation unto Christ. The church can help the apologist by parenting, partnering with, and praying for him or her.

While admittedly not an exhaustive treatment of all the challenges faced by those who desire to advance the gospel, Brooks has successfully addressed “the moral, religious, and justice objects that are most prevalent and persistent” (151) in the urban context. Liabilities of the book include the tendency to be overly simplistic in places and a penchant for making sweeping claims (e.g., related to the importance of the city, the distinctive missional context of the city, and the intensity, fluidity, and diversity of the city, etc.) that would have benefited from further explanation. Still, I recommend *Urban Apologetics* as a good introductory text for those within an urban setting who want to become better equipped as evangelists and teachers.